

# Fortney: Getting kids to play outside is a 21st century challenge



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Published on: June 1, 2017 | Last Updated: June 1, 2017 4:32 PM MDT



Ella Andruchow, left, and Nora Warren do some gardening at Edworthy Park on Thursday, June 1, 2017. *AL CHAREST / POSTMEDIA NETWORK*

“There is nothing like digging in the dirt — kids just naturally want to play with mud.”

On Thursday morning, Devon Karchut's son, Roger, is literally up to his elbows in nature, his little legs and arms smudged thanks to the pretend flower garden he's been tilling, and the mud pies he and scores of other little ones have been making.

Karchut isn't the least bothered to see her three-year-old get dirtier by the minute, as he plays at the Bow River's edges in Edworthy Park. In fact, she knows it's much more than child's play.

"It's really an essential part of development," says the Calgary physiotherapist. "A child's sensory system needs it."

Karchut takes outdoor play so seriously, in fact, that she's one of the local moms behind a gathering Thursday morning called Fantastic Mud. By late morning, up to 75 babies, toddlers and preschoolers — with parents, of course — play at various stations that encourage getting dirty.

It's just one of several events around the province for Get Outside and Play Week ([getoutsideandplay.ca](http://getoutsideandplay.ca) (<http://getoutsideandplay.ca>)), which runs May 27 to June 3 and is hosted by the Alberta Council for Environmental Education.

For those of us who remember childhoods spent outside until our parents called us in either for meals or bedtime, the idea of an official organization dedicated to such a natural activity might seem strange.

Christina Pickles, the council's program manager, agrees. "Earlier generations would scratch their heads," she says. "But things have changed, and the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction, so we're hoping to shift the focus back on outside play."

Pickles has growing support for her claim that outdoor play isn't just fun for kids, it's essential for healthy development. Over the past few years, study after study has shown that Canadian children are falling behind compared to those in other industrialized countries when it comes to daily exercise, with only nine per cent age five and up getting an hour of exercise a day, a number that falls far short of the recommended 180 minutes of physical activity daily.

Such a gap is contributing to a childhood obesity rate of around 13 per cent in Canada, a near tripling since 1980.

Unfortunately, too many children are being allowed to get the lion's share of their entertainment from technology. Because of the explosion in screen use among children of an increasingly younger age, the Canadian Paediatric Society released new guidelines Thursday for how much time children five and under should spend in front of a screen.



Christina Pickles of the Alberta Council for Environmental Education gets expressive during Get Outside and Play Week. *AL CHAREST / POSTMEDIA NETWORK*

The society recommends that children age two to five should get no more than one hour of screen time per day, with infants two and under entirely avoiding it.

At Edworthy Park on Thursday, the gaggle of little ones demonstrate that while times may change, the lure of nature is still impossible to resist.

For Alex O'Rourke, spending time outside while her four-year-old son Francis makes a mud pie benefits both child and parent.

"It's really play that is led by the child," says the mom, who is studying for a master's degree in environmental education and communication. "For young kids, so much of their life is adult-led. When we're enjoying unstructured play outside, I get to see his personality and skills in new ways."

O'Rourke is so passionate about the importance of it for all kids that she founded the Urban Wild Family Nature Club ([urbanwildparent.com](http://urbanwildparent.com))

<http://urbanwildparent.com>). “We give simple tools for parents to engage their kids in the outdoors,” she says. “It’s not just good for the child, it’s good for the family and the community.”

Leah Warren, who saw an ad for the Fantastic Mud event at her local library, knew it would be a worthwhile outing for her and three-year-old daughter Nora.

“She loves gardening with her grandma,” Warren says as the adorable girl indulges in some serious outdoor playtime. “She’s covered in mud. What’s not to love?”

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